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AUTHOR Palmberg, Rolf
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INSTITUTION Central Inst. of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderbad (India).
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ABSTRACT

The use of the term "strategy" in second language communication is discussed, and a typology of communication strategies is presented. Communication strategies are those systematic devices a second language learner uses in attempting to express precise meaning in the target language. Definitions of learning strategies and communication strategies found in the literature in this field are presented. It is suggested that a second language learner, in theory, adopts either of two principal communication strategies. The learner may avoid difficult words or grammatical constructions by producing something different than was intended or may omit the difficult words. This has been called a "risk-avoiding" strategy. In the opposite case, when the learner adopts a "risk-taking" strategy, he uses all linguistic resources to express his intended meaning, often at the risk of failing to achieve his communicative end. These resources include paraphrasing, invention of new words, guessing, and borrowing from other languages. A typology of communication strategies which is mainly a systematization of the typologies presented in Varadi (1973), TC & D (1976), and the Tarone (1977) is presented. The six basic communication strategies are the following: avoidance, appeal for assistance, admission of ignorance, paraphrase, transfer, and mime. Examples are included. (SW)

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# Strategies of Second-Language Communication

Rolf Palmberg

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The study of communication strategies is a relatively new area of interest in interlanguage research. By communication strategies we understand those systematic devices whereby a second-language learner expresses meaning "when faced with the need to communicate with a less than adequate interlanguage system" (Corder, 1975 : 209), i. e. his attempts to express—in spite of his language difficulties—precise meaning in the target language. The present paper, which is an attempt to review the literature in this field, discusses the use of the term 'strategy' and presents a typology of communication strategies. Also, some of the problems involved in the study of communication strategies are examined.

1. Larry Selinker, who introduced the notion of interlanguage (1969 : 71), also listed five "central processes" which influence the nature of the learner's interlanguage. These processes include "strategies of second-language learning" and "strategies of second-language communication" (1972 : 215). The distinction between learning strategies and communication strategies was later made explicit by Richards and Sampson, in their observation that one has to separate "the learner's organization of what he perceives" from ' what he produces" (1974 : 13).

The following definitions of learning strategies and communication strategies were given by Tarone, Frauenfelder, and Selinker (TF & S): A learning strategy is

> a process of rule-formation...a tentative hypothesis which the learner forms about the nature of the target language, which is tested and subsequently modified (1976 : 99-100).

A communication strategy (TF & S do, in fact, use the term 'production strategy' : cf. Tarone, Cohen, & Dumas (TC & D) 1976 : 78), on the other hand, is

> a more general process...a systematic attempt by the learner to express meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed (1976 : 100).

From these definitions one easily concludes that the terms 'strategy' and 'process' are synonymous, and this is, unfortunately, how they have most often been treated in the literature. There have, however, also been attempts to arrive at a distinction between the two terms (by, e. g., Brown, 1976a, Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1977, and Jordens, 1977), the most practical one being expressed as follows :

> *Strategy*...refers to the way the learner arrives at a certain usage at a specific point in time, and *process*...to the systematic series of steps by which the learner arrives at the same usage over time (Blum & Levenston, 1977 : 6).

2. Some of these terminological inconsistencies obviously originate in Selinker's description of two of his central processes' as 'strategies'. Selinker was, however, aware of this problem, admitting that

> Concerning the notion 'strategy' little is known in psychology about what constitutes a strategy ; and a viable definition of it does not seem possible at present (1972 : 219).

He goes on to state that

> Even less is known about strategies which learners of a second language use in their attempt to master a target language and express meaning in it (1972 : 219).

Neither of these statements is completely true any longer. The best working definition proposed for the notion 'strategy' so far is, no doubt, that of Kellerman, saying that it is "a well-organised approach to a problem" (1977 : 93). Also, several typologies of communication strategies exist (it should be noted that in these typologies the term 'communication' has been restricted to mean the learner's ability to pass on, to communicate, precise, factual information only), for example those by Ickenroth (1975), TC & D (1976), TF & S (1976), Tarone (1977), Blum and Levenston (1977), Palmberg (1978a, b), and, for written communication strategies, Varadi (1973), Jordens (1977), and Ringbom (1978).

3. A basic problem in the study of communication strategies is that learners' utterances can be judged only on their own merit. As we know only what a learner produces, we cannot know how close he comes to producing what he actually wants to produce. In an attempt to overcome

this problem Tamas Varadi asked Hungarian learners of English to describe in writing a series of pictures, first in English, then in Hungarian. The native version, written immediately after the English version, was suppposed to reveal exactly what the learner wanted to say in English, i.e. his "intended meaning" (1973 : 5).

Similar methods to establish a learner's intended meaning have been used by later investigators of communication strategies, notably by Elaine Tarone and associates. They have, however, concentrated their analyses on tape recordings of spoken rather than written material. Some of the reasons for this are that speech is spontaneous and (compared to 'test' communication) more like 'real' communication than writing, and that spoken narratives reveal also the pauses, hesitations, and corrections that learners make while struggling with their task.

Native speakers too occasionally meet with language difficulties, but second-language-learner strategies are much more frequent than the communication strategies native speakers use in such situations, and not so difficult to recognize. By reference to the mother-tongue version the intended meaning can be fairly reliably established in test situations, especially if completed with interviews (proposed by, e.g. Jordens, 1977). Furthermore, interviews are useful in the classification of strategies.

4. What strategies of communication, then, does a second-language learner make use of when faced with language difficulty? He may, in theory, adopt either of two principal strategies. He may avoid difficult words or grammatical constructions by producing something different from what he wanted to say or even by omitting the difficult words. This is what Pit Corder (1978) calls a 'risk-avoiding' or 'message-adjustment' (a term borrowed from Varadi, 1973) strategy. In the opposite case, when the learner adopts a 'risk-taking' or 'resource-expansion' strategy, he has a strong motivation or need to express his intended meaning. To do so, he uses all the linguistic resources that he has available, often at the *risk* (hence the terms 'risk-avoiding' and 'risk-taking') of failing to achieve his communicative end, i.e. the successful passing on of precise information. These resources include paraphrasing, invention of new words, guessing, borrowing from other languages (e.g. the mother-tongue), etc.

The following typology of communication strategies is, in the main, a systematization of the typologies presented in Varadi (1973), TC & D (1976), TF & S (1976), and Tarone (1977), and applies particularly to the classification of strategies used by learners facing lexical difficulties. The six basic communication strategies are the following: *avoidance*, *appeal for*

*assistance*, *admission of ignorance*, *paraphrase*, *transfer*, and *mime*. These strategies are outlined below and illustrated with examples from Palmberg (1978a).

(1) Three different avoidance strategies can be identified (for the notion of avoidance, see Schachter, 1974, and Kleinmann, 1977): (a) *Topic avoidance* (TC & D, 1976) occurs when the learner simply omits those words that he does not know (e.g. "I can see three mountains"; target: "cave", since in his mother-tongue version the learner said (in translation): "I can see a cave and three mountains"). (b) *Message abandonment* (TC & D, 1976) occurs when the learner starts producing a target-language utterance but does not know how to go on ("He shoots...with a...then he shoots his shadow"; target: "bow"). (c) *Message reduction* (Varadi, 1973) occurs when the learner deliberately chooses to be less specific than he originally intended to be ("animals" for "ants").

(2) *Appeal for assistance* (Tarone, 1977: cf. TC & D, 1976) occurs when the learner asks the experimentor for the correct word, or asks him whether a word is the correct one ("A man comes out of the .. er...what is this in English? (the learner points to the picture of a cave)").

(3) *Admission of ignorance* (Palmberg, 1978a) is a report by the learner that he does not know a particular target word ("...then he...shoots a...I don't know whatcha call it"; target: "arrow").

(4) The paraphrase strategy includes four subcategories: (a) *Approximations* (cf. Palmberg, 1978b) are those various types of confusions between target-language words possessing grammatical and/or phonetic similarities ("crave" for "cave"). (b) *Word coinage* (Varadi, 1973) occurs when the learner creates a new word in order to report something for which he lacks the appropriate word ("arrow gun" for "bow"). (c) *Circumlocution* (TC & D, 1976) is a description or definition of a target word ("A man comes out from the...some kind of hole in the rock"; target: "cave"). (d) *Lexical substitution* (TF & S, 1976) means the use of an existing target-language word, which often, but not always, shares some semantic elements with the word that the speaker intends to communicate ("string" for "bow").

(5) Three types of transfer strategies can be distinguished: (a) *Language switch* (TC & D, 1976) occurs when the learner uses a word from a language other than the target language to convey his intended meaning ("He takes a...er...'pilbåge' [Swedish for "bow"] and shoots"). (b) By *anglification* (Ringbom, 1978) is meant the giving of an English pronunciation or ending to a non-English word ("/pail/" for "arrow":

cf. Swedish "pil"). (c) *Literal translation* (Varadi, 1973: cf. Tarone, 1977) occurs when the learner uses word-for-word translations from a language other than the target language ("arrow bow" for "bow": cf. Swedish "pilbage", literally 'arrow bow').

(6) *Mime* (Tarone, 1977) refers to a nonverbal action performed by a learner in order to communicate an unknown target word. Tarone gives the following example: "...and everybody say (the learner claps his hands)"; target: "applauds".

5. It has been suggested that additional strategies of communication may be distinguished, used particularly by learners facing syntactic difficulties. However, these strategies are often more difficult to elicit experimentally than those presented above. Furthermore, it is not always clear to what extent the strategies used to overcome syntactic difficulties are, in Kellerman's (1977) sense, consciously adopted by the learner. These strategies include *overgeneralization*, *prefabricated patterns*, and *overelaboration* (also see Richards & Kennedy, 1977).

A typical example of overgeneralization, i.e. the application of target-language rules to inappropriate target-language forms or contexts (Richards, 1971), is "he goed" for "he went". The prefabricated pattern, on the other hand, has been defined as a "regular patterned segment of speech" employed "without the knowledge of its underlying structure, but with the knowledge as to which particular situations call for what patterns" (Hakuta, quoted in TC & D, 1976: 80). One example given by Hakuta is the "do-you" pattern, producing, for example, "What do you doing?" for "What are you doing?". By using overelaboration (TC & D, 1976: so termed after 'overindulgence' in Levenston, 1971) learners attempt to produce careful target-language utterances which, however, result in non-native-like "stilted and inordinately formal" language (1976: 81). TC & D give the example: "Buddy, that's my foot *which* you're standing on", where, in casual style, 'which' would usually be deleted.

*Simplification*, it has been suggested, is another strategy of communication used particularly by learners having syntactic difficulties. Simplification, defined by Richards as "increasing the generality of rules through extending their range of application, and through dropping rules of limited application" (1975: 116), can be seen for example in omitted morphemes and inflections (cf. Richards & Kennedy, 1977). Such a view, however, brings with it not only terminological problems. A language learner cannot, in any psychological sense, be said to *simplify* what he may not even possess (cf. Corder, 1977). On the other hand, the *result* of many

communication strategies, i.e. the interlanguage of the learner, is certainly often simpler in structure than the target language (cf. Mühlhäusler, 1974). Native speakers can, however, at times make conscious attempts to simplify their speech in order to facilitate communication. Such simplification, which may be grammatical and/or rhetorical (cf. Corder, 1977), can be seen for example in *baby talk* (Ferguson, 1964) and *foreigner talk* (Ferguson, 1971).

6. Even with our present state of knowledge, several questions in the field of communication strategies remain unanswered. One of them concerns the choice of communication strategies. What are the factors that make an individual learner use a particular strategy in a particular situation? So far, there have been studies of possible relationships between the preference for a particular communication strategy by a learner and factors such as mother-tongue (Palmberg, 1978a, b), age (Taylor, 1975), level of proficiency (Ickenroth, 1975, Rubin, 1975), and personality characteristics (Tarone, 1977).

The communication strategies presented in this paper are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. A prerequisite for further studies will therefore be a better definition of the strategies that second-language learners make use of. Only then can we start answering questions such as: To what extent are the strategies used in test communication identical to those used in real communication? To what extent are the strategies used in second-language communication identical to those used in the mother-tongue (cf. Corder, 1978)? Is it possible to relate certain strategies to efficient communication (in terms of the successful passing on of precise information) (cf. Cohen & Aphek, 1978)? If that is possible, how can a language teacher profit from such a hierarchy of communication (including subcategories), set up for a particular source language and target language (cf. Palmberg, 1978c)? Can, for example, efficient strategies be taught (and learned) (cf. Ickenroth, 1975)? With these answers valuable insights into second-language learning can be provided, particularly concerning the actual production of utterances by the learner.

Department of English
Åbo Akademi
Finland

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